

Montana Women Vote Opposition Testimony to SB 394

EXHIBIT 12
DATE 3/20/09
SB 394

March 19, 2009

Member of the House State Administration Committee:

My name is Alysha Goheen Jannotta and I am testifying in opposition to SB 394. I represent Montana Women Vote, a coalition of women's organization that work statewide to educate and mobilize low-income women to vote. In the past three election cycles we have registered over 12,000 Montana voters in our effort to include unlikely voters in the democratic process. We, of course, are particularly concerned about how any change to voting law could affect low-income voters who move more frequently. We are also deeply troubled by the outcry of Native communities, about how this system could affect voters in communities with less reliable mail systems. In addition we are concerned by how the cost and availability of postage could disproportionately affect already disenfranchised voters.

Montana Women Vote sees potential advantages to vote by mail and has had success in helping voters absentee vote. I personally spent many, many hours as part of the Interim Committee coming up with suggestions on how to move toward vote by mail in a thoughtful way that addresses the concerns I mentioned. Unfortunately SB 394 is even worse than the HB 18 pilot project bill, in that none of this process is reflected and none of these concerns are addressed in this two page bill that fundamentally changes our voting system. Section 4 of SB 394 was amended to include some "feel good" language that suggests counties should consider drop-off sites and accessibility and "identify any specific effort to increase or enhance participation" in their election plans— but no where is there a minimum standard set or clarification as to how any of this should be done. This really leaves each county and each Clerk to make his or her own rules.

In a recent Oped co-authored by Missoula County Clerk Vickie Zeier she promised to have 10 drop sites throughout the county and accessible voting. This does not surprise me, it is clear to everyone that Vickie takes her job very seriously and does all she can in encourage voter participation. I am sure that other Clerks around the state lobbying for this bill have similar intentions. But we won't be lucky enough to have Vickie forever and not having standards for implementation codified in law so they are longstanding and consistent around the state is more than concerning to us. As this bill stands each county could mail their ballots on different days. They are at their discretion as to what extent they want to implement drop off locations and how voters will be informed about this massive election change. I think we can all agree elections are already confusing and complicated. But with this bill we could have 52 different ways of administering a statewide election. Just imagine how complicated it will be for Montana Women Vote, Montana Conservation Voters or any other statewide campaign to try to explain to confused voters what the system will be in their particular county.

If we are moving to fundamentally change our voting system, it is critical that we do so in a careful, thoughtful manner. SB 394 seems to be a "just go for it" piecemeal approach that alters our fundamental right as citizens to vote. The potential money saved is not enough to offset the cost of disenfranchising voters. If we are to move to all mail ballots in our state we need to do so in a coordinated, well-planned, evaluative way – that takes into consideration voters in addition to budgets. That is why I urge you to please vote "no" on SB 394. I am available for questions if needed.

Thank you for your time,

Alysha Goheen Jannotta
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